Rhythm, routine and ritual: strategies for collective living among first year students in halls of residence

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Abstract
Students' experiences and negotiation of transition to adulthood and communal living in halls of residence are the central themes of this paper which is based on the results of a survey carried out by the authors with students at Leeds Metropolitan University. Key questions in the survey elicited information about how students negotiate the experience of collective living, what strategies and practices they adopt, and how these relate to their transition to adulthood. 42 students from years one, two and three took part in focus groups, responded to questionnaires or completed reflective logs. Findings suggested that transition involves a physical and emotional journey, and has positive and negative aspects. One negative feature was conflict, and three distinct strategies emerged to deal with this: avoidance, direct challenge to others and determined socialisation. Students also developed a range of consistent and repetitive social and cultural practices, reflecting the non-linear character of transition to independence. At times these practices involved a conscious desire to delay obligation and responsibility. They also illustrated the rich and sometimes contradictory nature of collective living, and of how social relationships and adult identity are negotiated. Throughout the passage towards independence, rhythm, routine and ritual appear crucial in providing students with the means of negotiating collective living, and the personal experiences that follow from this. The overwhelming conclusion was that the choice to live in halls of residence was positive.

Rationale

This research evolved as a result of seminar discussions with students, where they reflected on their shared experiences of living in halls of residence, and how these often represented critical events in relation to transitions into adulthood. These critical events invariably resulted from trying to negotiate and navigate paths through the tensions created by study, domestic responsibilities, friendships and paid work. This process resulted in the development of complex, interconnected strategies to manage their experiences of transition in the context of communal living.

Literature review

The research is informed by theory and research from a number of areas:

- transitions to adulthood
- communal and collective living
- space and time, halls of residence and education.

Transitions to Adulthood

Research has explored young people's perspectives and experiences of key transitions related to the family, education and training, employment, income, accommodation, relationships and consumption (Thomson et al., 2002). These are increasingly understood as interrupted, extended and diverse transitions for young people from different social groups (Allan & Crow, 2001, Goldson et al. 2002, Griffin, 2004, Morrow, 2003, and Roche et al., 2004). Wider social systems shape this transition, for example the state withdrawal of certain forms of support for young people and the expectation that family and/or community will provide this support. The linear trajectory of school, college, university, work is no longer relevant – how young people negotiate the transition to adulthood is complex, with interwoven strands (Allan & Crow, 2001, Mac an Ghaill & Haywood, 2005, Morrow, 2003).

A major review of research relating to student experiences of university life in France evoked the complexity of transition from older childhood to young adulthood by concluding that students are young people "discovering the pleasures of a freer kind of sociability" (Galland & Oberti, 2000, p.115) and that "socializing among themselves, they may seem to have been merely thrown together by circumstance, but they are in fact living fundamental, intense modern moments of student experience" (ibid., p.115).

A UK study considered the development of a student 'habitus' – the durable and generalised disposition that suffuses a person's action throughout an entire domain – in relation to students living on campus and at home (Holdsworth, 2006). It concluded that those in the former category developed a more successful student identity, and as a result adapted to university better than those living at home. Mindful of the charge that socio-economic factors may be at play here, this research concedes that although the findings are related to class (students from poorer backgrounds tend to live at home) this does not alone explain the findings. Rather, both the practical problems faced by these students, and the difficulty of integrating into social life at university, and therefore of developing a student identity, or habitus, are strong elements here. Those students who can establish and maintain friendship bonds in their new environment adjust better to student life than those students who remain isolated (Enochs & Roland, 2006).

Communal and collective living

Student experience of collective living can take many forms, but what seems to unite them, and the findings from the research, is that they all contribute in some way to personal development. Thus Jordyn & Byrd (2003) studied some 278 students in New Zealand where they carefully controlled for age and socio-economic status (although no mention is made of gender or ethnicity). They concluded that the living arrangements of students do affect their personal development. More specifically, students living away from parents were more likely to have established an adult identity. The researchers

point out that it is impossible to determine causality here. A study of 782 students in Holland suggests, in contrast to the above study, that there is no correlation between social integration and independent living (Beekhoven, De Jong, & Van Hout, 2004). It also found that students living in halls of residence experienced more personal problems than students living at home. The inescapable conclusion is therefore that "it does not make sense to hold on to the notion that to participate fully in student life, one should live in student rooms" (p.288).

Space and time, halls of residence and education

The concept of space and time in this study, based on the work of Moss (2006), explores the links between routines, rhythms and academic study in the context of life in halls of residence. With this analysis, the lived experiences of daily routines, (although internal to halls of residence) relate to, reflect and are shaped by normative expectations of social life external to halls of residence, for example the clock-led times of work, leisure and study. In addition, routines take on a specific and unique character, forged by the way space is organised within halls of residence and formed by peer group relationships. An important dimension explored in this research is how different spaces within halls of residence are attributed different values and meaning according to architecture and design but these have the potential to be re-designated according to existing or changing needs and desires. Similarly, the personal rhythms which students develop in order to accommodate academic study, leisure and work, often require negotiation and renegotiation in order to meet obligations, responsibilities and needs.

An early study in the United States of the relationship between academic and non-academic areas of student experience concluded that the full potential of students will not be realised until the emotional and physical aspects of their growth are given as much attention as the cognitive dimension (Miller & Prince, 1976). Although many subsequent studies seemed to be preoccupied with how to create powerful learning environments, so that the end product – a successful degree outcome – was the overwhelmingly important factor (Schroeder & Mable 1994), others conclude that specially established residential learning communities did not in fact improve students' academic achievement and retention directly (Pike, Schroeder & Berry, 1997; Berger, 1997); and the U.S. Boyer Commission (1998), promoted the argument that an important element of creating a learning environment is cultivating a sense of community within halls of residence.

Research questions

This research explores strategies for collective living and the transition to adulthood for students living in halls of residence by addressing the following:

- What are students' perspectives and experiences of everyday living in halls of residence?
- How do students negotiate the experience of collective living?
- What strategies do they adopt (individually and collectively) and how do these relate to their transition to adulthood?
- What cultural practices are in place, have evolved and are evolving?

Research Strategy

How the research was conducted

The choice of a qualitative approach to inform the research design accommodated the experiential, biographical nature of the material. Selection and design of research tools was a collaborative process involving students who had prompted the initial idea. Using a focus group to help design questionnaires established a student perspective and ensured their experiences and ideas were central (Hinds, 2000).

Methods

All students who took part in this study were studying for an undergraduate degree in Childhood Studies at one institution in England. With one exception, all were female, all from the UK, white and between the ages of 20 and 34 years.

Focus groups

Focus groups were a highly appropriate method for the purposes of this research (Morgan, 1998). Three focus groups, led by the researchers, took place involving a total of 12 students. Research questions were introduced for discussion and the conversations were recorded and transcribed.

Questionnaires

Semi-structured questionnaires, designed to elicit qualitative word-based responses, (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000) were distributed to participants. Two distinct questionnaires were available: one for students who had lived or were living in Halls of Residence (16 of these were returned) and one for those who did not live or were not living in Halls or Residence (nine of these were returned).

Reflective log

Reflective logs were used to capture what has been called "thick description" (see Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000, p.293). A pro-forma was developed and used during a session which lasted one hour. A researcher guided students through a series of prompt questions. Five level one students living in halls of residence took part in this.

Ethical issues

Informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity of participants were assured within the focus groups where sensitive material may be shared. A major issue was that of power, and managing the separation of 'researcher role' from 'tutor role'. Participants were assured that there would be no negative consequences to their involvement with the research. Participants were asked to check and approve each stage of the process. Participants' willingness to continue with, or desire to withdraw from, the research was central to meeting ethical guidelines.

Results

The findings are presented to reflect the themes of the research.

Transition to adulthood

Transition occurred at different levels. Physically – as a movement away home, friends, siblings, parents into a new uncertain place – and emotionally, expressed in terms of excitement, stress and anxiety. The move to university represented a critical moment in which both took place, often simultaneously.

Three distinct strategies were adopted by students in response to specific difficulties arising from collective living, such as noise, sharing bathrooms and kitchens, and harassment or bullying by others.

First, some students withdrew from or avoided conflict and confrontation by eating in their bedroom to avoid the messy kitchen; keeping their personal kitchen equipment in the bedroom to make sure it was clean; and cleaning up after themselves.

A second strategy was directly or indirectly challenging those students who they believed were responsible for problems. This included piling up dirty plates of others outside their door; directly challenging others; and reporting people for bullying.

The third strategy was a conscious and determined effort to socialise by sharing and being co-operative. This included being generous with crockery and food; keeping noise levels down; showing respect for others' personal space; and developing a system with fellow students for sharing facilities.

There was a link between these strategies and the transition to adulthood. Positively, students were conscious of being more independent, assertive and considerate, of having improved negotiating skills, and becoming more mature. Negatively, others reported becoming more emotionally dependent on their family, or finding it difficult to return home and adhere to parents' routines. There was also mention of financial hardship resulting from newly-found independence.

Communal and collective living

The overwhelming conclusion was that the choice to live in halls was positive, although many students experienced negative incidents, mostly in relation to domestic arrangements and tensions in relationships with others. Students found themselves amongst others with varied expectations and prior experience of living arrangements, attempting to adapt to changed circumstances. For most this state of flux and uncertainty was resolved through socialising and learning about each other, negotiating individual and collective routines and rhythms of collective living.

Space and time, halls of residence and education

A variety of routines developed. When students did not have classes or work to attend, mornings tended to be solitary and slow. Consistent cultural practices included a form

of day-night reversal, with late nights followed by late morning or afternoon rising the following day; and watching low-quality daytime television. Students understood these behaviours as a 'regression' away from adulthood, surrendering responsibility, direction and obligations, where the structure of clock-led time on routines became blurred.

Routines associated with domestic tasks highlighted some challenges encountered by students on first entering halls, for example, having to phone home to find out how to use the washing machine. Many talked about conflict arising from the pressure on space. While communal areas such as the kitchen provided a space for cooking and eating, they were cold and small, so bedroom or study space became the favoured area for eating and socialising. Some activities emulated home life: cooking Sunday lunch replicated what students perceived to be 'adult' activities which they were now choosing to do for themselves with their flatmates.

A further routine was preparation for nights out. This began, at around 7.00pm, with a 'buzz' associated with personal grooming: the noise of showers, music or hairdryers, and smells and fragrances. Closed bedroom and flat doors would then open to signal the beginning of communal time and space in corridors or other shared areas.

Nights out in groups often gave rise to a common cultural practice: collecting trophies and challenging authority. This included recognised unacceptable behaviours such as smuggling large signs from buildings, or traffic signs and cones back into the hall of residence (having to avoid the security staff in the process). Sometimes there would be a pre-designated target such as 'collecting' large posters. These activities often had a competitive element, with the person with the largest or most impressive example being declared the winner.

An interesting cultural practice emerged when students described the `walk of shame', a ritual response directed at flatmates who stayed out all night, returning in the same clothes they went out in, the assumption being that they had 'pulled'. While this was a source of embarrassment it was also a sign of sexual prowess and the response from those who had woken in their own beds was a juxtaposition of moral disapproval and celebration.

The move to university represented a conscious decision to seek out independence. Critical though in their decision-making was the opportunity to live in university halls as this represented a kind of 'half way' transition to adulthood. Physical security, the knowledge that money management would be made easier by the inclusion of bills in the rent and the potential for meeting new and different people in a supportive environment were all important criteria.

Discussion and conclusions

The findings support the notion that the transition to adulthood does not progress in a linear fashion (Thomson et al., 2002). Rather it involves faltering steps towards independence, critical incidents which propel students forward, and a conscious decision

by some students to work at becoming independent, by dealing with challenges in particular ways. At other times, students seem to retreat into less adult-like behaviour. Throughout this inexorable journey towards independence, the functions of rhythm, routine and ritual appear crucial in providing students with the means of negotiating, processing and understanding collective living, and the personal, individualised experiences that follow from this.

The experience of dislocation emerges in the descriptions of emotional responses to separation but also in the sudden lack of an imposed daily structure. Daily routines were suddenly beyond the gaze of adults, even though, at the same time, these acted as a reference point for what they 'should' be doing. Social interactions allow students to learn about their flatmates; develop supportive networks; exchange information; discover themselves; learn to challenge, negotiate and manage tensions and conflict. Initially tentative social interactions become embedded in the development of routines and rhythms of collective living – individually, collectively, internally (within the flat), externally (in the wider world outside the flat). The haphazard grouping of young people emerges as a more coherent social group strengthened through the rituals of shared experience which make sense of their new lives as students living in halls of residence.

Within this liminal passage of time, clear rhythms and routines developed in relation to clock time and the use of space. Students were conscious that some of these (sleeping in late, watching poor quality television) were clear manifestations of a carefree attitude to their student years; that they knew they were moving towards independence but that this was coupled with a desire to delay obligation or responsibility. There is something of a paradox here: in expressing their independence, perhaps from parental control, students appeared to have a need to experience an almost childlike state which buffered them from the negative aspects of independence. The findings of Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld (2005) that within transition, friends provide emotional support, equivalent to family relationships, were borne out in our research. Similarly, in coping with and responding to stress, our research echoed the findings of Shaikh & Deschamps (2006) that students rely on peer support rather than formal student support services.

The rituals described by students seemed to relate mostly to social interactions, suggesting that they serve an important social function related to the transition to adulthood. Such behaviours as 'stealing' signs or traffic cones and smuggling them back to the halls, as challenging authority figures, and the 'walk of shame' may be ways in which students negotiate questions such as what is acceptable or unacceptable behaviour and who defines acceptability. Furthermore, it may be that the ritual itself, especially one involving a 'prize' for the most outlandish exemplar, celebrates, in the transition to adulthood, the freedom from influences normally constraining behaviour. Some rituals – such as the 'walk of shame' – seem imbued with contradictory meanings, simultaneously representing success and failure.

These rituals can further be viewed as personal transitions played out in a public manner. They appear to be, in the words of Galland & Oberti (2000, p.115)

"fundamental, intense modern moments of student experience" which contribute to personal development. The social imperative of ritual may have the function of capturing, subverting and reinventing popular culture within the students' world. In defying rules and expectations, students may be saying 'Look at me, I am here, being bold, independent, grown up.' In this way, rituals could confirm and strengthen individual and group social identity and, linked to communal living, a sense of social location. Thus the rituals become integral to the student experience as a whole, and therefore become part of wider student culture.

Limitations of the research

The sample used in this research has a heavy female bias. Furthermore, the relatively small sample from only one higher education institution limits the general applicability of the findings. Future research could serve to address these limitations by using a larger sample of both genders from a range of institutions.

Further work could also consider race, ethnicity, class, or disability. The literature focusing on the relationships between social divisions and higher education has concentrated primarily on widening participation agendas on access to university education for marginalised or minority groups. Within this, there are references to broader issues influencing student choices, including expectations about the experience of university life. There is also a body of research examining difference and diversity as it relates to student experiences of higher education (Forsyth & Furlong, 2000; Forsyth & Furlong, 2003; Furlong, 2007; Fleischer & Wilcox, 2007; Cooke & Bowl, 2007).

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